

Longhorn football could learn a thing or two from Greek myth

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In my many years of teaching ancient mythology, I have absorbed, as I hope my students have, the important lessons about life that the original myth-makers embedded in their stories.

One lesson is to be careful what you ask for, because you just might get it. A variant is to make sure you follow through on your side of whatever bargain you strike. A third is not to get too big for your britches — the Greeks called this hubris.

The immortal and ageless goddess Dawn falls in love with a handsome prince of Troy named Tithonus. She steals him away and asks Zeus to make him immortal. Zeus asks her, “Do you want anything else?” She says no.

Zeus makes Tithonus deathless, but not ageless. He grows older and older, shrivels up and finally turns into a chirping cicada — not what Dawn had in mind.

A similar fate befalls the Cumaean Sibyl. According to Ovid, Apollo loves the Sibyl so much that he offers to grant her one wish if she will make love to him. She asks to live as many years as the grains of sand she holds. When she later refuses to give up her virginity, Apollo gives her long life, but lets her, too, grow old.

Counterfactual history, like Winston Churchill’s famous 1931 essay “If Lee Had Not Won the Battle of Gettysburg,” focuses on key moments and their consequences by wondering “What if?” What if Dawn had thought through her request? What if the Sibyl had followed through on her promise?

Given the major distraction that the poor performance of the Longhorns football team has become lately at our University, it is worth posing a big counterfactual historical

question. What if Vince Young had not scored the winning touchdown with 19 seconds left in the 2006 Rose Bowl, considered by ESPN the fifth-greatest play in the history of NCAA football?

The touchdown won the national title for the UT Longhorns, just weeks after William C. Powers, then dean of the UT Law School and long a sports enthusiast, was officially named the 28th president of UT-Austin.

Winning the national championship was for head coach Mack Brown the NCAA sports equivalent of being head of a team of researchers awarded the Nobel Prize. As national champions, the football program brought in a bonanza in revenues from marketing souvenirs and our UT trademark.

The chief financial officer of the self-operating UT athletics program Ed Gobles has proclaimed, "We eat what we kill." Translation: Whatever monies athletics raises, it spends. Athletics director DeLoss Dodds has crowed, "We are the Joneses."

The die was cast. From the Vince Young Rose Bowl onward, there has been no restraining athletics. Hubris has prevailed.

Stadium expansions, large salary increases for coaches — not only in football — and a \$1 million annuity for the athletics director were approved by the cronies within the UT sports silo, the regents who attend football games in the president's skybox or their own, and the wealthy donors who, according to a local sportswriter, really decide whether head coaches are hired and fired.

The sense was that we would win another national title.

And we almost did. The Longhorns lost to Alabama 37-21 in the national title game following the 2009 season. Trouble was, right before that loss, Mack Brown was given, over the strong protest of a core of faculty leaders, a \$2 million raise. That set in motion the decamping of his heir apparent Will Muschamp.

Without Muschamp's defensive coaching genius, the Longhorns' fortunes have faded. Talk now is of winning Big XII titles. But this hope is almost counterfactual, given that

teams coached by Mack Brown have only been Big XII champions twice in his 15 years at UT (2005 and 2009).

One more counterfactual thought: If UT had lost the 2006 Rose Bowl, perhaps Vince Young would have played another year of college football, reined in his hubris about his own abilities and faced the transition to the fame and fortune of professional football with more maturity.

One positive fact: Young has now earned his degree in youth and community studies and has a loving wife and child. He can do some real good in the world before old age overtakes him, as it overtook Tithonus, and overtakes us all, even our greatest athletes.

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